

# On a Wing and a Prayer? Challenges for Reducing Armed Violence

Most deaths due to violence now occur outside traditional conflict settings. In these contexts, violence is complex and often hard to understand, linked to a variety of conditions, situations and trends which are deeply embedded and difficult to shift without considerable investment, contextual knowledge and risk. Development is indispensable to reducing armed violence, while aid efforts are expected to be informed by rigorous evidence and qualify as good value for money. Therefore, defining and determining success in this field is urgently needed. This policy briefing explores the challenges of generating better evidence as well as how to respond to complexity, proposing where efforts should be focused.

## Armed violence and political settlements

Armed violence can be described as the intentional, threatened or actual use of arms or explosives to inflict death or injury. It does not take place in a void but is institutionally and politically bounded, controlled and driven. Different types of violence such as conflict-related violence and criminal violence are inter-linked and can reinforce each other, which makes them both practically and analytically difficult to disentangle.

The concept of political settlements – referring to formal and informal processes of negotiation and bargaining between elite actors – can be applied to understand the relationships between different sets of political actors and their implications for reducing violence. In the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, a predatory and exclusionary political settlement centred on the appropriation of massive oil rents by relatively few federal (military) elites and major oil firms has fuelled violence and large-scale criminal activity. The co-option of militant leaders into the country's political settlement following the

government's amnesty in 2009 pacified the region to an extent. However, this expanded political settlement has not become more inclusive or democratic, and the threat of renewed violence looms large.

In Nepal, violence has morphed since the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in 2006. Criminal violence in Kathmandu and a proliferating number of armed groups in the Terai region bordering India have exposed the failings of the country's post-war political settlement, which has yet to address structural inequalities that fuelled the country's Maoist insurgency to begin with.

The disadvantage and marginalisation of young people is significant to understanding why violence continues in many places. In Nairobi's slums, a lack of economic opportunities has pushed young people into illegal activities and violent crime. They are routinely enlisted as foot soldiers for armed groups that oscillate between working as enforcers and mobilisers for politicians and operating as criminal outfits.

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## Data debacles and evidence myths

A lack of forensic data on armed violence in many contexts has confounded efforts to frame more effective responses. Rarely is data collected systematically in violent environments, which is unsurprising given that a great deal of violence happens at the margins, in the shadows and in places that are either beyond the reach of the state or where governments restrict access to information. As a result, approaches and techniques to address violence are rarely based on complete or even 'good enough' data. This does not imply that understandings of violence are necessarily wrong. However, it does make it difficult to accurately target scarce resources when there may be only a general sense of what is happening.

Piecing together a more complete picture and understanding of violence requires compiling data from multiple sources: police forces, military and security services, courts, public health and other social service providers, financial institutions, religious institutions, illegal and/or criminal organisations, informal bodies and groups and, local leaders. Even where official data is available, its quality is often suspect. Moreover, poor data reflects politics and, specifically, an indifference to violence – if it is happening to people that those in power do not care about. Many incidents of violence are never reported (a problem that is more acute in peripheral or marginal areas). Monitoring armed violence is itself politically sensitive and authorities may stymie reporting efforts; in extreme cases reporting may also threaten the safety and security of some individuals and groups.

Reflecting an increased appetite for evidence-based programming in the development sector more widely, policy guidance in the field of armed violence reduction now emphasises the need to invest in generating high quality data as well as rigorous monitoring and evaluation.

This means establishing clear and achievable goals and targets, methodologies for quantifying results and appropriate indicators for assessing the impacts of interventions. Momentum is building to establish appropriate baselines against which armed violence reduction goals and targets can be evaluated, as well as find agreement between funders, governments, advocates, and violence-affected populations on what would be an appropriate timeframe for measuring when armed violence is successfully reduced. For example, a background paper for the 2010 Oslo Conference on Armed Violence proposed the following three goals for armed violence prevention and reduction activities: (1) reduce the number of people physically harmed from armed violence; (2) reduce the number of people and groups affected by armed violence; and (3) strengthen institutional responses to prevent and reduce armed violence. It also outlined a framework of eight targets and indicators to measure trends in armed violence and progress in its prevention and reduction. Efforts in this area continue.

Still, some criticise the turn to metrics and 'objective' (measurable) data, as well as the related idea that policymaking is a largely technical exercise founded on 'evidence'. An alternative view emphasises the political nature of the policy process, and the need to devise policies based on sound assumptions, clear indicators and the best available data of what works. This so-called 'evidence debate' raises questions around what constitutes 'good' data and whose knowledge counts. Its implications are quite fundamental for efforts to improve responses to armed violence.

While the appeal of more robust evidence is unquestionable, and the need to assess the effectiveness of existing policies and measures in order to improve them is undeniable, typically what is sought is quantifiable data. Yet, given that quantitative data is patchy and unreliable

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in many violence-affected places, stakeholders involved in addressing violence must identify alternative data sources as well as ways to verify, cross-reference and connect existing data from a variety of sources to generate better insights. Ultimately, neither quantitative nor qualitative data alone is sufficient. Rather, efforts to build 'evidence' on situations of violence require more effective ways of triangulating different evidence types, as well as analytical approaches to interpret and understand variables and contexts that are more difficult to measure or test using conventional survey instruments.

### **Strengthening responses to address the underlying drivers of violence**

It is widely recognised that violence is multi-variant, multi-causal and driven by shifting motivations and, thus, that a contextual analysis and approach is vital. However, there is much less certainty about how to do this. Development policy in the field of armed violence reduction emphasises the need for a comprehensive analysis of violence as well as responses to address the problem. Responses must be multidisciplinary, multisectoral and implemented at multiple levels, and promote genuine local leadership. Integrated and whole-of-government approaches are also advocated bringing together justice, policing, development and conflict-resolution expertise.

However, making this happen in practice is far from certain. Researchers and technical experts often focus on coordination challenges and the need to improve coherence amongst multiple existing efforts by governments, militaries, police, communities and aid partners. Sometimes they advocate a greater use of pooled funds and integration of violence reduction measures in budgets. Sometimes there is a renewed emphasis on partnerships between state authorities, civil society and the private sector to join up complementary efforts and competencies.

The mantra of improved coordination and partnership does not necessarily address the more fundamental conundrum of how to act effectively as part of a longer-term and dynamic process of moving out of violence. The very emphasis on the need for a 'comprehensive approach' itself suggests that reducing violence will necessarily be part of a broader transformation in economy, polity and society – something that is shown by a political settlements analysis. Yet, truncated aid cycles and the pressure to show quick results can result in short-term, projectised interventions that do little to shift the underlying drivers of violence. Reducing violence is a long-term goal, and results are not guaranteed.

Naturally, given the complex framing and underlying factors driving and perpetuating particular situations of armed violence, it is widely recognised that local ownership and leadership are indispensable to effectively address these, as well.

Part of the problem is the increasing tendency by aid actors to avoid taking risks. Stringent legal and regulatory requirements for due diligence by donors and their partners impede efforts to work with individuals, organisations and groups that are often all too quickly associated with terrorism, crime and related violence. A more proportional and cooperative perspective is needed that both reverses the presumption of potential wrong-doing by non-state organisations and groups working to reduce violence, and acknowledges the positive contribution they can make in addressing conditions that lead to and perpetuate violence. Funding bodies also need to take more calculated risks and pool these with other actors. This would minimise potential political consequences at home but should not weaken accountability to populations living with violence who must be more centrally involved in defining good practice in this emergent field.

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## Policy recommendations

Reducing armed violence through development is arguably an outsize ambition, an impossible aim that dwarves the capacities of most conventional development actors to make a significant difference. Yet, improving physical safety and security rank amongst the most important ways in which peoples' lives could be improved in many areas outside of traditional conflict settings. Although there is widening acceptance of the need for a comprehensive approach and a central role for development to reduce armed violence, a key challenge now is to move from rather generic policy guidance to more concrete action that can make this happen.

### **Striking the balance between quantifiable measurement and sound qualitative insight**

One challenge is generating better insights into the causes and factors perpetuating armed violence in different places as well as ways to assess the impacts of efforts to address the problem. While the need to formulate achievable goals, targets, and indicators in the field of armed violence reduction is obvious, the glorification of quantifiable (measurable) data unhelpfully marginalises entire fields of knowledge that are essential to understand and address situations of violence. Qualitative and ethnographic approaches that emphasise critical reflection and explanatory insight are equally needed alongside the use of measurable data drawn from standard survey-type instruments.

### **Adapting aid approaches and modalities to handle complexity**

A second challenge in this field is how to respond to a problem that is inherently complex, connected to a variety of conditions, trends and pressures that cut across discrete areas of policymaking, planning and budgeting. Aid apparatuses are poorly equipped to work with such complexity. More joined-up efforts and better partnerships are essential. This briefing identifies the need for more thinking and development of funding approaches that enable interventions beyond truncated project cycles.

### **Strengthening local capacities for addressing violence**

A third challenge is to formulate different approaches to support local capacities for reducing and preventing armed violence. Very practical legal and regulatory obstacles impede the development of different models for working with local stakeholders in violent environments. A more cooperative perspective is essential within prevailing counter-terrorism and anti-money laundering frameworks, as are ways of pooling risk that open up the possibility for more innovative arrangements in supporting local stakeholders.

## Further reading

OECD (2012) *Breaking Cycles of Violence: Key Issues in Armed Violence Reduction*, OECD/UNDP/Geneva Declaration

Geneva Declaration (2010) 'Measuring and Monitoring Armed Violence: Goals, Targets and Indicators', Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, background paper for Oslo Conference on Armed Violence, 20–22 April 2010, Geneva Declaration/Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs/UNDP

## Credits

This *IDS Policy Briefing* draws on insights from a collection of Evidence Reports and Policy Briefs in the IDS Addressing and Mitigating Violence Programme. These can be downloaded at: [www.ids.ac.uk/idsresearch/addressing-and-mitigating-violence](http://www.ids.ac.uk/idsresearch/addressing-and-mitigating-violence).

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